

Related topics

For further study:

The moral life; the Ten Commandments; hierarchy of truths; sacrament of marriage; community of love; conversion; biblical justice; God; Jesus Christ; discipleship

Closing Prayer

All-seeing God,
you alone judge rightly our inmost thoughts.
Teach us to observe your law from the heart
even as we keep it outwardly.

Purify our desires,
calm every anger,
and reconcile us to one another.
Then will our worship at your altar
render you perfect praise.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers · Ordinary Time 6, Year A²

CPL • LBC Year A Proper 02.odt • 2023-01-15

² *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

Proper 2

*Sunday between 11 and 17 February, if earlier than the
Second Sunday before Lent · Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

Principal Service readings

Deuteronomy 30.15-20	Choose life and prosperity not death and adversity
or Ecclesiasticus 5.15-20	Before each person are life and death
Psalms 119.1-8	Blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord
1 Corinthians 3.1-9	We are God's servants, working together
Matthew 5.21-37	The higher moral standards of Christ's way

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The higher moral standards of Christ's way

²¹You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin,

cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³⁴It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” ³⁵But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³⁶Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” ³⁷But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁸or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁹And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ⁴⁰Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Matthew 5.21-37 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

In the Sermon on the Mount, which today’s reading is taken from, Jesus presents both a continuation of and break with the law of Moses. He is reacting more to the distortions which ‘the scribes and Pharisees’ (5.20) have introduced in the law. The kingdom that Jesus proclaims presupposes the practice of justice, not so much legal and formal as profound and reasonable. It is always easier to follow rules than to share out of love. Jesus imposes greater demands, but a central feature is reconciliation (5.24).

What we offer God is worthless if we are depriving others or being inconsiderate of them. The ‘others’ are our reference point. High moral standards or good, but shouldn’t be used as a reason to harm others.

Having murderous thoughts (5.22) is not actually the same thing as murder, but we should treat such thoughts as seriously, as urgently, and seek to remedy the harm done.

Adultery might seem relatively harmless – it is actually not illegal in this country – but the betrayal of a committed relationship, even in the thinking of it, is harmful. Again, we should think about the harm done to others.

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Divorce is allowed in civil law, but what should the church’s teaching be? Matthew gives an exception in 19.9: ‘whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery’ (unlike Mark and Luke), but what is ‘unchastity’? It covers sexual relationships outside marriage, but might also include any kind of sexual relationship outside the bonds of marriage.

What Jesus says shouldn’t always be taken literally, such as the statement: ‘If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away’ (5.29), but this leaves the assessment to the reader, about how literal to be. Here, it is helpful to look at church tradition for a sense of grounding.

Quotations

1

Gradually, the unthinkable becomes tolerable, then acceptable, then legal, then praised.

Joni Eareckson Tada, 1949–

2

The first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this: that all reality hinges on moral foundations. In other words, that this is a moral universe, and that there are moral laws of the universe just as abiding as the physical laws.

‘Rediscovering lost values’ / Martin Luther King, Jr. Sermon, Detroit, 1954

3

Young people are moving away from feeling guilty about sleeping with somebody to feeling guilty if they are *not* sleeping with someone.

Margaret Mead, 1901–1978

4

If no set of moral ideas were truer or better than any other, there would be no sense in preferring civilised morality to savage morality.

C. S. Lewis, 1898–1963